

Timi Near bids a fond farewell to San Jose Rep with 'Spelling Bee'

[By Karen D'Souza](#)

[Mercury News](#)

Posted: 05/08/2009 06:15:31 PM PDT

Updated: 05/10/2009 06:53:09 AM PDT

How do you spell F-A-R-E-W-E-L-L?

After 21 years at the helm of the city's flagship theater, Timothy Near is staging her swan-song production, "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee."

The 64-year-old stepped down as artistic director last spring after spending nearly a third of her life in the job. Since then, she has been serving as a company adviser. Now she's about to take her final bow here directing the local premiere of the cheeky musical "Spelling Bee," which is now in previews and runs through June 7.

Near came to the Rep in 1987, just as the high-tech boom was reshaping the face of the valley. During her tenure, the company grew from a local arts institution to a regional stalwart with a showcase theater in the heart of downtown.

"When I arrived in San Jose, I saw it had a vision for itself of being a city of art and culture," Near recalls. "I think that during my 21 years we helped to make that a reality. ... We have contributed to building the self-esteem of the city."

Near (who goes by Timi) has long seen the fates of the Rep and city as intertwined. She often has described the relationship as "a city that helped build a theater and a theater that helped build a city."

While striving to get the Rep on the national radar, Near's defining moments included bringing Hollywood stars such as Holly Hunter ("By the Bog of Cats") and Lynn Redgrave ("The Mandrake Root") to the Rep; presenting premieres by Anne Bogart, Lynn Nottage and Philip Kan Gotanda; and getting the new theater built, then moving from the company's old home, the Montgomery Theater, to the new one in 1997.

"I had to fight for it," she says of the theater, "and I'm very proud of it."

"The Rep's beautiful blue home will always be her legacy," says Robert Kelley, artistic director of the Peninsula's TheatreWorks. "Under her leadership it became one of San Jose's greatest cultural assets and a landmark destination of the revitalized downtown. ... Timi gave every ounce of herself to the Rep for so many years."

Financial challenges

There have been crises during her watch, including a financial meltdown from which the company is just beginning to rebound. The city of San Jose bailed out the Rep in 2006 with a \$2 million line of credit.

Rick Lombardo, who succeeded Near as artistic director last year, says the worst seems to be behind them. On the heels of a blockbuster season, he points to solid single ticket sales (they scored a big hit with "The Kite Runner"), and subscriber renewals indicate the troupe is making progress, despite the recession.

"We already had our near-death experience," Lombardo says wryly. "That made us lean and mean. We keep a close eye on the bottom line, and we are able to respond to the current economy to keep us on track."

Indeed, many applaud Near for making the best of tight budgets that forced her to scrap the company's new-play festival and curtailed her ability to dream big onstage. She had to work with one eye on the stage and the other on the bottom line.

"She knew how to get it done when the resources were low," says Rep founder James Reber. "She was incredibly good at coming up with theater productions that were exciting, entertaining and high quality no matter what the budget was. This might, ultimately, be her greatest contribution."

Many also credit Near with raising the profile of the arts in the valley.

"Her legacy has been building an organization that people can believe in. There's a 'there' there now," says Bruce Davis, executive director of Arts Council Silicon Valley, "She helped put the theater on the map and the city on the map."

Lisa Mallette, executive artistic director at City Lights Theater Company, says she has always looked up to Near.

"She has done a great deal for the entire South Bay theater community during her tenure at San Jose Rep, and she will be missed."

Of course, not everyone sings Near's praises. Some theatergoers found her aesthetic — which often is marked by dreamy imagery, gentle revelations and progressive values — too edgy, while others found it too tame.

"I was bored by too many of the shows," says longtime Rep subscriber Bob Kieve. "During much of Timothy's reign, my judgment about a given Rep production was (indicated) by whether I returned to my seat after intermission. On many occasions, I did not. And there were others, friends, who reacted in the same way."

Near's collaborators are quick to defend her directorial vision, however.

"I was always delighted and surprised by the fare that Timi offered at the Rep," says composer Craig Bohmler. "I know much of it was edgy and not particularly conservative, but as a writer who looks forward and rarely back, I was appreciative of this approach."

No regrets

For her part, Near has no regrets about things she did while at the Rep, where she says her goal was always to grow the appetite for adventure.

"I regret some of the things I didn't do, but I do not regret anything I did," she says. "I tried my darnedest."

So far, Near's post-Rep life as a freelance director — an artistic gypsy unfettered by institutional pressures, hopping from gig to gig — seems to suit her.

Over the past year, she has directed "Uncle Vanya" at California Shakespeare Theater in Orinda, "Doubt" at Center Repertory Theatre in Walnut Creek and "Enchanted April" at Arizona Theatre Company in Tucson.

Taking a rehearsal break from "Bee" in San Jose, she says, "I am very happy to be back here and be chatting with everyone and working on the play and not be responsible for running the place."

Talking shop and gossiping about current events from Susan Boyle to the swine flu, Near seems to have blossomed in her post-artistic-director period. If in the past she seemed shy and reserved during interviews, she now seems friendly and relaxed, an expansive soul whose sense of contentment borders on blissful.

Indeed, she says a feeling of playfulness is what inspired her to pick "Spelling Bee" as her final play at the Rep. It's a lovably quirky Tony-winning musical about a gaggle of kooky competitive-spelling middle-schoolers for whom the dictionary will always be BFF.

"It's a good time to do a musical. People want that sense of uplift," says Near, who now makes her home in Sonoma County. "This is a celebration of children and their courage in the face of stress."

Childhood years

Her own affinity for the arts began early. She grew up on a farm in Potter Valley, near Ukiah. She rode a horse to school.

With no television or Internet, she and her sisters — Holly (who grew up to become a folk singer) and Laurel — had to find ways to amuse themselves. Their parents would sit at the top of a rise and watch them sing and dance.

All three sisters are named after plants that grew on the ranch (Timothy is a prairie grass). At 12, her grandmother took her to see Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews in "My Fair Lady."

"Theater saved my life," Near says. "As a very shy child, dance and singing gave me a way to be social and communicate despite my shyness. In high school, I was able to channel my wild energy. ... Ultimately theater led me to meet my husband (Center Rep artistic director Michael Butler), who is the best thing to have ever happened to me."

In 1981, Near won an Obie Award for her performance in Emily Mann's "Still Life." She took the reins at the Rep six years later, after working all around the country as an actress and director. When tapped to run the Rep, she had been serving as interim artistic director of the well-respected Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, and she was ready put down roots.

She saw Silicon Valley then poised to come into its own as not just a high-tech hub but a cultural one as well.

Certainly Near seems tickled to relinquish responsibility for meeting everything from subscriber needs to box office bench marks. At this point in life, she wants to think big picture, not bottom line.

"I wanted to open myself up to new possibilities, new experiences, the wide open spaces," she says. When asked about where she sees the Rep headed going forward, she demurs.

"I don't really think about that — what the Rep should do, where it should go," she says, heading back into the rehearsal hall. "I love it, and I'm curious to see what happens. But I'm ready to let it go."

Contact Karen D'Souza at kdsouza@mercurynews.com or 408-271-3772. Check out her theater reviews, features and blog at www.mercurynews.com/karendsouza.

"The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee"

Book by Rachel Sheinkin,
music and lyrics by William Finn, conceived by Rebecca Feldman, additional material by Jay Reiss
Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo De San Antonio
Through: June 7
Tickets: \$33-\$62; 408-367-7255. www.sjrep.com

Timothy Near career timeline

1968: stars opposite John Lithgow in Chekhov's "The Seagull" while a student at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts

1981: wins Obie Award for performance in Emily Mann's "Still Life"

1987: becomes artistic director of San Jose Rep

1997: oversees opening of the new downtown theater space

1999: stars as Ruella in "Communicating Doors"

2001: directs world premiere of "By the Bog of Cats" starring Holly Hunter

2007: announces plans to step down, chooses final season, including the blockbuster "The Kite Runner"

2009: takes her final bow at the Rep, directing "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee"